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ABSTRACT

A study was done of adult students at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in 1991 to gather information on the characteristics of this population. A survey instrument defined the non-traditional student or adult learner as any student over the age of 24 attending MTSU. A total of 1,200 surveys were sent to full-time students, and 300 responses were received. Preliminary review of the responses found that 50 of the students were married and 150 indicated no martial status; most lived within 50 miles of the campus; and many had children and expressed a strong interest in child care. Of the respondents, 100 were employed part-time, and 75 were employed full-time with many students citing problems with maintaining employment and attending school. Students also requested knowledgeable advisors and expressed frustration at the lack of financial assistance. Results of the study prompted MTSU to establish an Adult Service Center which has become a successful one-stop source for information, referral and support services. The report includes a description of the structure and operation of the Center. Included are one figure, two tables, a copy of a letter to all adult students and a facsimile of the student survey as well as seven references. (JB)

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IMPLICATIONS OF INCREASED ENROLLMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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The average college student is getting older! A 1988 study by the College Board found that six million students - 45 percent of the nation's undergraduate enrollment - are at least 25 years old. Within a decade, according to the board, adult learners (60 percent of them women) will be a majority on college campuses across the country. A February, 1991 report by the U. S. Department of Education confirms these trends (Bianchi, 1991).

The number of adult students will continue to increase in our colleges and universities for a number of reasons: (a) our general population is aging; (b) the "baby boomers'" are now grown, providing increased personal freedom; (c) displaced executives and other workers are finding a need to update their skills to remain competitive in the labor force; (d) due to higher priority of organizations recognizing the importance of education, a program of lifelong learning has been adopted by adults in the career world; and, (e) "mid-life crisis" reprioritizing is bringing adults back to school.

The number of older students has been growing more rapidly than the number of younger students (Table 1). Between 1980 and 1990, the enrollment of students under age 25 increased by 7 percent. During the same period, enrollment of persons 25 and over rose by 34 percent. From

1990 to 1997 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects a rise of 16 percent in enrollment of persons over 25, and an increase of only 5 percent in the number under 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991).

Recognizing an increased enrollment in adult students at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in April 1991 a survey instrument was designed to collect data. For the purpose of this survey, the "non-traditional student" was defined as any student over the age of 24 attending MTSU either full-time or part-time. [Note: In Tennessee the "non-traditional student" is now referred to as an "adult learner", and is defined as anyone 23 years of age or over or who has been out of school for at least two years] A list of these students was obtained from the Registrar's Office. The primary means of distributing the surveys was campus mailboxes because of postage costs were prohibitive. Because of this limitation, the majority of responses were from non-traditional students enrolled full-time. [Note: Due to the school newspaper, as well as information spreading by word of mouth about the project, we are continuing to receive requests for the questionnaires and reaching part-time students as well] Although the final results and specific data have not been tabulated, a preliminary review has shown consistent response

patterns to the information requested.

Twelve hundred surveys were sent to full-time students. Of the initial 300 responses received, 20 were male and 170 were female. The age breakdown was divided into three categories: age 25-30 (150 replies); age 31-40 (100 replies); and age 41+ (50 replies). Fifty of the replies were from married students and 150 indicated no marital status. Most of the responding non-traditional students live within 50 miles of the campus, but fifty of those replying commute from 50 to 175 miles, three to five times a week.

The children of these students ranged in age from "due any time" to 35 years. To determine the interest and/or need for child care of various types, it was found that there were 80 children between 3 months and kindergarten; 85 in elementary school (grades 1-6); 15 in middle school (grades 7-8) and 40 in high school (grades 9-12). Thus, there was a great deal of interest expressed in child care during regular classroom hours in both daytime and evening classes, and many students indicated an interest in study hall facilities being available for their school age children.

One hundred of the students were employed part-time and seventy five were employed full-time. There seems to be a considerable number of problems with attempting to maintain employment and attend school.

Several students mentioned losing their jobs because specific classes needed for a degree are scheduled at only one time period and in some cases, only once every two or three semesters. Several students expressed a concern about the possibility of earning a degree by taking only evening classes. There seems to be a problem with scheduling "required core classes" opposite each other making it impossible to meet some of the necessary requirements within a reasonable length of time. (A student reported that when inquiring whether it would be possible to receive a degree attending only night classes the response was "No, at least some of the required classes will have to be taken during the daytime.")

It was suggested that the University expand it's evening program and add weekend classes that would enable them to meet the necessary requirements. It was also suggested that evening and weekend classes be offered during the summer sessions. Students requested that advisors be people who "care" and who are familiar with the "unique circumstances" of most adult learners. The attitude of the non-traditional student is somewhat different from that of some students enrolled for the first time, because they are more focused in their topic of study. [Note: Many of the suggestions and requests mentioned in the responses to the survey

were already available at MTSU for traditional students, but because of scheduling or lack of knowledge about the availability were not being utilized by most adult learners.]

Financial assistance and/or arrangements (as well as information about existing programs for adult and/or returning students) was felt to be non-existent. Frustration was consistently expressed about being in a "Catch-22" situation. Having been out of school for an average of 3-10 years, adult students had incurred financial obligations which made returning to school even more difficult. If the job had to be altered or sacrificed in order to return, the financial obligation still remained. If the student is also a parent, child care costs also need to be a consideration, but when they made application for assistance most students found they did not qualify for one reason or another. Requests were repeatedly made for a designated person who would be familiar with the unique financial situations being encountered by returning students who did not fit the normal classifications.

Due to these responses, the administration of the school recognized a need to pursue the opening of an Adult Service Center at MTSU. A presentation of the proceeding survey information was given to the MTSU Committee on Status and Role of Women. The goal of this presentation

was to gain support in developing an Adult Service Center (ASC) at MTSU. The primary goal of this ASC would be to meet the needs identified through the survey.

After support was gained, a working committee was appointed. This committee is composed of administration, staff, faculty, and students. The ASC at MTSU was opened to students on August 26, 1991. The ASC is a coordinating and networking center that assists students in utilizing the services available on campus and in the community. The ASC is a unique office and is therefore not a duplication of services offered anywhere else at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). The ASC is proving to be a networking and coordinating service within the University that is not only useful to adult learners but students of all ages. The Center also provides assistance to and works with individual offices and departments of the University. The ASC at MTSU is the ultimate example of the old adage "Find a need and fill it." Or, in this case, find a multiplicity of needs and fill them all, and do it day after day. The Center and its early success is also the epitome of volunteerism.

The survey found that there was a group of even more basic needs in the general area of making the transition to the university environment while remaining in the work force and continuing as a parent. Many of

these students also must drive great distances to access each class, and the result is a group of frustrated, sometimes bewildered, people who need help, sometimes simple, sometimes complex. Thus was born the Adult Service Center, a "one-stop shop" for information, referral and very often emotional support. The office has become a focal point for the unique needs of these adult/returning students.

The goal of the ASC is to assist the adult/returning student's transition to the University environment by offering assistance in finding and utilizing the services already available at MTSU and serving as a consistent support group. Most departments and offices have attempted to meet the unique needs of the adult learner when these specific needs have been brought to their attention (i.e. scheduling, extra expense money due to specific assignments, lab hours, establishing student study groups and providing seminars to refresh information learned years ago).

Since its opening with volunteer staff and work/study personnel, the new office has assisted more than 1,000 MTSU students, and a variety of other persons attempting to return to school. Records kept in the ASC office indicate that its services are more "need-based" than age-directed, due in large part to the numbers of students age 18-22 who are working days and attending classes at night. They are "non-traditional"

students but they do not fit the official definition. Only 20% of the more than 1,000 students who have been assisted have been age 23 or under. Of the remaining 80%, more than three-quarters have been between the late 20's and the mid 40's. The ratio of male to female is about 50/50. But in all cases the common denominator is need, not age.

Many of the students attend evening classes. Whereas traditional students on a "normal schedule" have access to all university services, the adult/evening student faces a campus that, except for the classrooms and a few other exceptions, is closed for business. These students cannot contact an advisor, visit offices such as financial aid or registration, or visit the campus clinic for medical aid.

Requests for assistance average 25-30 per day with a high on several days of 50. These numbers are exclusive of students who simply stop by for coffee, directions, catalog/forms or just to talk and be supported. The numbers also do not reflect the secondary impact which results when one student shares an answer and helps other students.

Major concerns of adult learners have ranged from registration problems and class schedules and child care problems, to accessing faculty members, adjuncts and offices of the University at times when the students can be on campus. The office has worked with housing to assist

in more closely matching roommates; assisted with numerous drop/add requests; assisted with registration; picked up loan checks while the offices were open; worked with the infirmary to explain the need for the measles vaccination; gained access and assistance for students to the various labs, and served as an emergency contact system for parents of young children who have no local back-up support system available.

The telephone is the life-line of the ASC. A large amount of contact with many students takes place over the phone during their working hours. Staff are able to either meet the callers' needs from data already collected, or find out how they can be assisted. This is done by making contacts while University offices are still open. The necessary information or forms are ready for the student to complete when she/he arrives on campus for their evening class. A number of students travel over 100 miles to attend MTSU. This, in addition to their work schedules and family responsibilities, cuts down on their time available to access the services needed during regular university office hours.

With each passing day, the time required to solve recurring problems decreases as the database grows and answers available in the ASC will probably result in a decrease in repetitive questions in many departments and offices of the university.

In order to educate and enlighten the present and potential adult students at MTSU to the services available through the ASC, an open house was held in October 1991. the response to that event reinforced our belief that there was a dire need for a center providing these services. Since the opening in August 1991, the ASC has resulted in:

- establishing support systems for adult learners
- locating and securing financial aid
- extended book store hours
- selected administrative offices extended hours
- making resources available such as:
  - substance abuse support
  - "friendly" computer seminars
  - stress management seminars
  - study skill seminars
  - career counseling
  - adult student orientation programs
  - referral to guidance and counseling services available within the University

Any report on the ASC would be woefully remiss if it did not include comments on the volunteerism which has been largely responsible for the

ability to maintain the long hours of operation. One cannot say enough about the way student volunteers have caught the spirit of how this office can really help people and have pitched in, worked long hours and basically made it happen. It is not uncommon to find "displaced executives" who commanded huge salaries in the business world, making coffee or answering the phone or just talking with a student who needs an ear. Logs are being kept that identify the services that have been requested and offered through the Center.

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APPENDICES

STEPS TAKEN IN DEVELOPMENT OF THE ADULT SERVICE CENTER AT MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

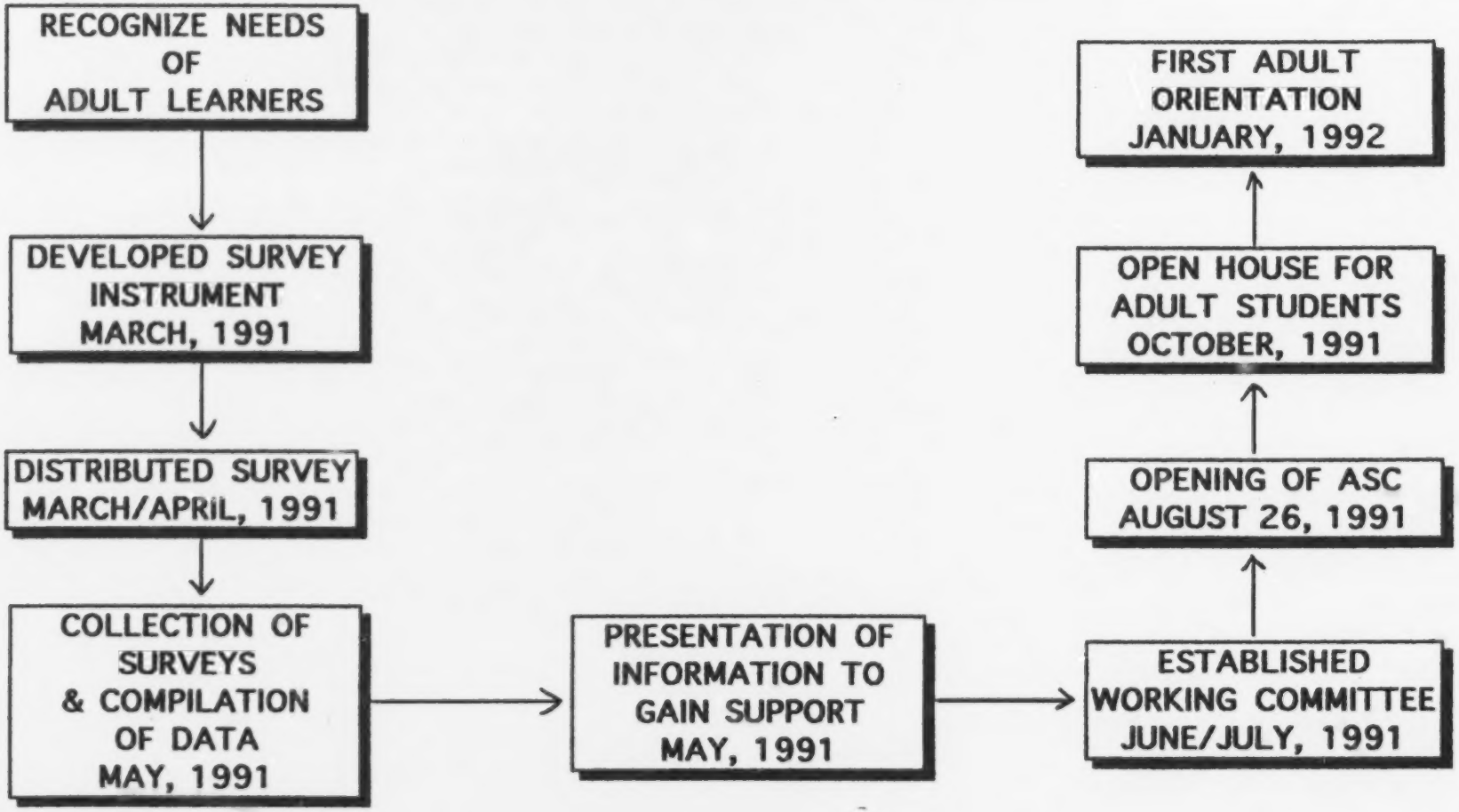
RECOGNIZE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS
DEVELOPED SURVEY INSTRUMENT MARCH, 1991
DISTRIBUTED SURVEY MARCH/APRIL, 1991
COLLECTION OF SURVEYS & COMPILATION OF DATA MAY, 1991
PRESENTATION OF INFORMATION TO GAIN SUPPORT MAY, 1991
ESTABLISHED WORKING COMMITTEE JUNE/JULY, 1991
OPENING OF ASC AUGUST 26, 1991
OPEN HOUSE FOR ADULT STUDENTS OCTOBER, 1991
FIRST ADULT ORIENTATION JANUARY, 1992

TABLE 1

FALL ENROLLMENT IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (U.S.)

(in thousands)

AGE	1989			2001 (PROJECTED)		
	FULL-TIME	PART-TIME	TOTAL	FULL-TIME	PART-TIME	TOTAL
18 - 19	2,611	355	2,966	2,842	406	3,248
20 - 21	2,070	451	2,521	2,296	565	2,861
22 - 24	1,238	753	1,991	1,245	773	2,018
25 - 29	747	1,188	1,935	610	936	1,546
30 - 34	356	1,015	1,371	252	889	1,141
35 +	423	2,019	2,442	662	2,738	3,400

TABLE 2

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY
Fall 1991

AGE	NUMBER	PERCENT
17 0R LESS	26	0.17%
18 TO 20	4,845	30.91%
21 TO 24	5,984	38.18%
25 TO 34	3,293	21.01%
35 TO 64	1,516	9.67%
OVER 64	9	0.06%
	15,673	100.00%

22 AND OVER	8,686	55.42%
23 AND OVER	6,865	43.80%
25 AND OVER	4,818	30.74%

An Open Letter to All Non-Traditional MTSU Students

Hi!

I am a senior here at MTSU and am in the process of collecting information on the "Non-traditional college student" attending this University and YOU have been designated as a member of this elite category. For the purpose of this research I am defining the "non-traditional student" as any person 25 years of age or over attending MTSU either full or part-time.

The information collected from this questionnaire will help me fulfill class requirements, but will also be made available for use in examining the need for an Adult Learning Center at MTSU.

This Project is being supervised by Dr. Jeanette Heritage (Psychology) and we are hopeful that this information will also be useful to the Tennessee Board of Regents as they examine ways to meet the unique needs of the non-traditional students on Tennessee college campuses.

It has been estimated that by 1993 the majority of students on college campuses nationwide will be "non-traditional" and Dr. Heritage and I hope that the information we collect now, will enable MTSU to be a step ahead. However, our study will only be successful if YOU participate. There are nearly 3,000 non-traditional students on the campus at MTSU this semester and we need to reach as many as possible and get their input in this project. We really need your assistance so PLEASE participate by completing the attached questionnaire and returning it to Dr. Heritage or to me at your earliest convenience.

We have designed the form so that all you have to do is:

- 1) complete the form:
- 2) cross through the mailing label with your name on it;
- 3) fold the form so OUR return address shows, and
- 4) drop the completed questionnaire in CAMPUS MAIL.

Thank you for participating in this project. If you have any friends who fit this category and have not received a questionnaire please feel free to copy this one or call and we'll see that you get as many copies as you need.
For additional information please contact Dianne Bowden or Dr. J. Heritage at 898-2565 or write MTSU Box 499.

Thank you,

Dianne Bowden

Dianne Bowden
Dr. Jeanette Heritage (supervisor)
MTSU Box 499
898-2565

Middle Tennessee State University
Non-Traditional Student Survey

Dianne Bowden
Dr. Jeanette Heritage
MTSU Box 499
898-2565

Age _____ **Female**_____ **Male**_____

Marital Status: _____Single
_____Married
_____Divorced
_____Other

If married, is your spouse _____Employed Full-time
_____Unemployed
_____Homemaker
_____Student
Other_____

Date of High School Graduation_____

Date of College Entrance_____

Have you been in College continuously? _____Yes _____No

If no, why was your college education interrupted?
(If more than one of the following apply, please indicate by numbering in order of importance.)

_____Finances
_____Academic Status
_____Marriage
_____Military
Family Responsibilities: _____Children
_____Parents
_____Spouse
_____Change of Career Plans
_____Didn't see the necessity at the time
_____Other (Please be as specific as possible)_____
_____

Are you a _____**Full time student** _____**Part time student**

How many schedule hours are you carrying?_____
Are you enrolled in Daytime classes?_____
Night classes_____
Both_____

Approximately how many hours per day do you spend on campus in class?_____
Out of class?_____ (time between classes)

When you are not in class, where do you spend the time?
Library_____Cafeteria_____Other_____

Do You have children? _____yes_____No
Ages of Children _____, _____, _____,_____, _____, _____

If you have children, how many are in
_____Daycare
_____Preschool
_____Kindergarten
_____Grades 1-6
_____Grades 7-8
_____Grades 9-12
_____College
_____College Graduate

Why did you decide to attend MTSU?

_____Live in Murfreesboro
_____Within Commuting distance
_____Academic courses available
Other_____

If you commute to MTSU, approximately how many miles?_____

How many days per week do you make the trip?_____

Are you employed? _____Yes _____No
If yes, _____Part-time
_____Full-time

If you are employed, do you find class scheduling compatible with your work schedule _____Yes _____No
(If not, what suggestions would you make for scheduling classes to meet your needs?

_____
_____

What degree are you pursuing?_____

What is/are your field(s) of study? Major_____
_____
Minor_____
_____

Is this your original area of study? _____Yes _____No

(If not, when did it change? Why?)
_____While in school originally
_____Upon re-entering college
_____After graduation
_____Changed career plans after working
_____Employer requested additional education

If you were previously enrolled in college, how long had you been out of school before returning? _____

If you have been out of school for a period of time, what could MTSU have done to make your return easier or sooner?

_____

_____

Do you have any suggestions for making it easier for non-traditional students to enroll at MTSU?

_____

What financial assistance and/or arrangements would be helpful to you as a non-tradtional student?_____

_____

Have you had any problems in scheduling sessions with faculty or advisors? _____Yes _____No

If "Yes", what suggestions would you make to keep this from being a problem in the future?_____

_____

Are the present MTSU Bookstore hours meeting your needs? _____Yes _____No

If not, what hours would work with your schedule? _____to_____ OR _____to_____

What other student services could MTSU provide that would be helpful in meeting your unique scheduling needs?

_____

_____

If MTSU had an adult learning center, what facilities and/or services could it offer which would be of assistance to you and your educational future?

_____Child care _____Day/night care

_____Study hall facilities with assistants (for school age children)

_____Career Counseling

_____Refresher Courses in Basic areas of study:

_____Math

_____Science

_____English

_____History

Other_____

_____Study Centers (Please describe) _____

_____

What support groups or special events tailored to the non-traditional student would be helpful or of interest to you?

_____Positive Child-rearing techniques

_____Stress management

_____Dealing effectively with aging parents

_____Surviving the "empty nest" syndrome

_____Marriage support groups

_____Effective Study and test-taking techniques

_____Returning to school successfully after being away for years